

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS

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INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY RABAT

AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 5459

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR TS XI

SUBJ: PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA'S HEALTH, FUTURE

PLANS AND VIEWS ON MAGHREB UNITY

1. SUMMARY: MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE HASSEN BELKHODJA SPOKE ON JULY 31 BY PHONE WITH PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA'S WIFE IN PARIS AND RECEIVED GLOWING REPORTS OF A MIRACULOUS IMPROVEMENT IN BOURGUIBA'S HEALTH. THEIR RETURN IS NOW SLATED FOR THE END OF RAMADHAN. MADAME BOURGUIBA RELATED THE PRESIDENT'S REJECTION OF BOUTEFLIKA'S EFFORTS TO INVOLVE TUNISIA IN THE WESTERN SAHARA ISSUE AND TO MAKE SOME NEW GESTURE ADVANCING MAGHREBIAN UNITY. BOURGUIBA SHARPLY CRITICIZED THE BAD MANAGEMENT OF BOUMEDIENE IN ALGERIA. END SUMMARY.

2. AFTER LUNCH AT HIS HOME NEAR BIZERTE ON AUGUST 1 I MENTIONED TO HASSEN BELKHODJA, MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE AND MEMBER OF THE POLITICAL BUREAU OF THE DESTOURIAN SOCIALIST PARTY, THAT ENCOURAGING RUMORS ARE AFLOAT HERE THAT PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA'S HEALTH HAS UNDERGONE A
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GREAT IMPROVEMENT DURING HIS SIX-WEEK SOJOURN IN GENEVA AND PARIS. BELKHODJA TOLD ME HE HAD SPOKEN OVER THE PHONE JUST THE DAY BEFORE WITH MADAME WASSILA BOURGUIBA WHO HAD NOTHING BUT THE MOST FAVORABLE REPORTS TO CONVEY.

3. MADAME WASSILA SAID THE PRESIDENT WOULD BE GOING TO THE AMERICAN HOSPITAL IN PARIS AUGUST 1 FOR A THOROUGH

EXAMINATION TO CONFIRM HIS TRANSFORMATION. SHE TOLD BELKHODJA THAT THE PRESIDENT'S FRENCH DOCTORS HAD TAKEN HIM OFF THE GREAT RANGE OF MEDICAMENTS HIS SWISS DOCTORS HAD BEEN PRESCRIBING FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS. THEY FOUND THAT SOME OF HIS MEDICINES HAD PRODUCED PERNICIOUS SIDE-EFFECTS INCLUDING IMPAIRED VISION AND NERVOUS TENSION. ONCE OFF THEM HIS VISION HAD IMPROVED AND HE WAS CALMER, HAPPIER, MORE RELAXED BUT POSSESSED OF MORE ENERGY THAN HE HAS SHOWN FOR A LONG TIME. THERE IS NO NEED FOR EYE SURGERY (FOR A LONG-RUMORED CATARACT). MOREOVER, THE PRESIDENT'S WIFE REPORTED, BOURGUIBA HAS A NEW SET OF DENTURES (HIS OLD ONES BEIN NOTICEABLY UNCOMFORTABLE) IN WHICH THE METAL USED IS DIFFERENT FROM THAT OF HIS LAST SET, DUE TO THE DISCOVERY OF SOME HARMFUL CHEMICAL REACTION THAT THE FORMER METAL HAD CAUSED IN HIS MOUTH. THIS FACT ALONE HAD CAUSED A MAJOR BOOST IN THE PRESIDENT'S MORALE.

4. I ASKED IF THE MINISTER HAD BEEN GIVEN ANY INDICATION OF THE DATE OF THE PRESIDENT'S RETURN TO TUNISIA. HE SAID MADAME BOURGUIBA TOLD HIM THAT THEY PLANNED TO COME BACK IN TIME FOR ID-EL-FITR AT THE END OF RAMADHAN (APPROXIMATELY SEPTEMBER 4). THE PRESIDENT WAS SAYING THT "NO ONE WILL BELIEVE THE CHANGE THAT HAS TAKEN PLACE IN HIM".

5. ACCORDING TO MADAME LA PRESIDENTE, THE MOST AMUSING EVENT OF BOURGUIBA'S STAY IN PARIS WAS HIS MEETING WITH CONFIDENTIAL

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ALGERIAN FOREIGN MINISTER BOUTEFLIKA. THE LATTER, WHOM THE PRESIDENT REALLY LIKES VERY MUCH, ADVANCED ALGERIAN PLEAS FOR (A) TUNISIAN SUPPORT IN THE WESTERN SAHARA ISSUE AND (B) AN EARLY GESTURE FROM BOURGUIBA TOWARD THE CAUSE OF MAGHREBIAN UNITY. BOURGUIBA TOLD BOUTEFLIKA THAT ALGERIA HAD CONCOCTED THE WHOLE WESTERN SAHARA MESS AND COULD FIND SOME WAY TO EXTRICATE ITSELF FROM IT BUT WITH NO RPT NO HELP FROM TUNISIA. MAGHREBIAN UNITY, BOURGUIBA SAID, MUST REMAIN A DREAM FOR A LONG TIME TO COME. HE ALSO HAD NO INTENTION WHATEVER OF HOOKING TUNISIA'S ECONOMY UP WITH ALGERIA'S AND FELT COMPLETELY SURE THAT NEITHER ALGERIA NOR TUNISIA WANTED TO ACCOMMODATE THEMSELVES EITHER TO COLONEL QADHAFI'S DISASTROUS NEW ECONOMIC IDEOLOGY OR TO HIS PRIMITIVE ISLAMIC STANDARDS. THE PRESIDENT TOLD BOUTEFLIKA, HIS WIFE REPORTED, THAT HE HAD PRIVATELY VOWED NEVER TO SET FOOT IN ALGERIA AGAIN (OVER SOME INCIDENT DURING HIS LAST VISIT) BUT IF BOUMEDIENE WANTED HIM OVER FOR ANOTHER VISIT HE WOULD HAVE TO AGREE TO LET HIM MAKE A MAJOR SPEECH IN ALGIERS TELLING EVERYONE WHAT WAS WRONG WITH THE WAY ALGERIA IS BEING RUN. ACCORDING TO BOURGUIBA, THE ALGERIAN LEADERSHIP SHOULD BE ASHAMED OF THE WAY IT HAS MISMANAGED ITS VAST HUMAN AND NATURAL

RESOURCES; IT IS A RICH COUNTRY, BUT TOO MANY OF ITS PEOPLE ARE HUNGRY AND JOBLESS AND THE SIMPLEST STAPLES ARE ALWAYS IN SHORT SUPPLY. HE WOULD PREACH THE BENEFITS OF TUNISIA'S BRAND OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC POLICY. AFTERWARDS BOURGUIBA CLAIMED THAT HE LIKED THE IDEA OF SUCH A SPEECH SO WELL THAT HE MIGHT JUST DECIDE TO MAKE IT IN TUNIS ON HIS RETURN.

6. COMMENT:THIS INFORMATION REGARDING THE STATE OF PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA'S HEALTH SEEMS QUITE AUTHORITATIVE AND CONFIRMS OUR RECENT INFORMATION FROM OTHER SOURCES, SOME OF WHOM ADD THAT THE PRESIDENT BLAMES HIS SON, HABIB BOURGUIBA JR., FOR HAVING PERSUADED HIM TO PUT HIMSELF UNDER THE CARE OF THE SWISS DOCTORS. FOR THE LOCAL PALACE-WATCHER SET THIS
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RUMOR HAS ALREADY BEEN THE BASIS FOR A BELIEF THAT WASSILA BOURGUIBA'S STAR IS AGAIN ON THE RISE AND BOURGUIBA JR.'S ON THE WANE. THE LATTER, INCIDENTALLY, HAS SPENT THE PAST FOUR DAYS IN PARIS WITH HIS FATHER PRIOR TO LEAVING WITH HIS FAMILY FOR A MONTH-LONG "PRIVATE" VISIT IN THE UNITED STATES AT THE END OF THIS WEEK.
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